

## Evolutionary European Perspectives on China in the Covid Era

# Report

Webinar Organised by

Institute of Chinese Studies

&

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung

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# Background

European perceptions towards China were becoming more complex even prior to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. The European Commission's document of 12 March 2019 on "EU-China - A Strategic Outlook" suggested that "China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the European Union (EU) has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance".

Over the last couple of years, postures in Europe vis-à-vis China have hardened, even while the latter's influence in the continent has been growing. In the Covid era, there has been sharpening of these anxieties and an added backlash on the issue of China's accountability for Covid-19 becoming a pandemic. At the same time, European countries appear to seek deep but more balanced engagement with China, avoiding the policies of confrontation or containment. In the escalating strategic rivalry between the US and China, the EU is not eager to take side, without being disinclined to hedge and balance to deal with some troubling traits of the rise of China and its increasingly assertive behaviour.

# Programme Overview

To explore the changing European perceptions about China in the wake of the Covid era, the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) in partnership with the India Office of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) organized the ICS-KAS Conversation on '***Evolving European Perspectives on China in the Covid Era***' on Wednesday, 24 June 2020 at 3:00 P.M IST on Zoom Webinar along with ICS media partner, ThePrint.

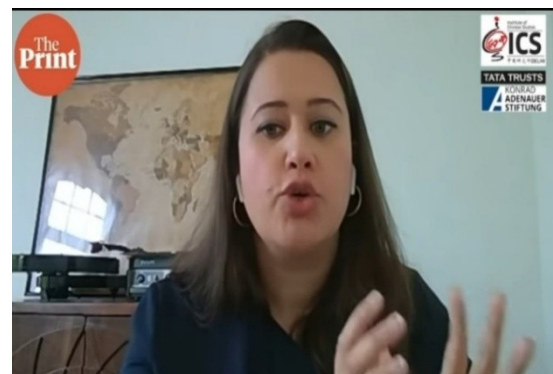
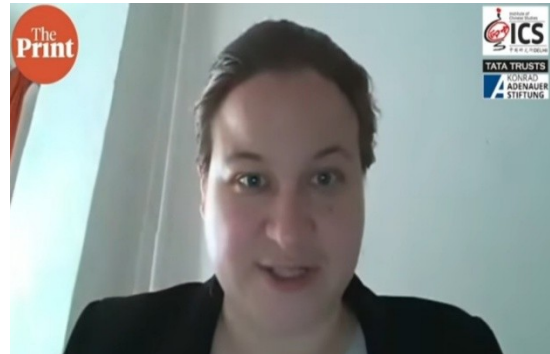
The conversation witnessed the presence of distinguished panelists from Leiden University, Netherlands and German Marshall Fund, Asia Program, Berlin who provided excellent insights on European perspectives on China and the changes that can be seen.

The panel comprised of the following panelists:

- Prof. Frank N. Pieke, Professor of Modern China Studies, Leiden University, Netherlands
- Dr. Andrew Small, Senior Transatlantic Fellow, German Marshall Fund, Asia Program, Berlin
- Dr. Mareike Ohlberg, Senior Fellow, German Marshall Fund, Asia Program

The conversation was moderated by Dr. Garima Mohan, Fellow, German Marshall Fund, Asia Program, Berlin.

# Glimpses





## Key Takeaways

- The outbreak of the Covid pandemic may be considered a watershed moment in the EU-China relations to a considerable extent as the crisis situation has helped crystallize the European outlook towards China.
- Concerns about China in Europe were already on the rise before the spread of the novel coronavirus. China was looked upon simultaneously as “a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance” (The European Commission’s document of 12 March 2019 on “EU-China - A Strategic Outlook”). These perceptions have hardened significantly in the course of the pandemic.
- Unlike some of the Asian countries, Europe does not face direct security threats from China in the form of border disputes. In Europe, the major security concerns with regard to China are in the form of hybrid threats, disinformation, and interference. Economic competition and systemic rivalry are also becoming sharper.
- China’s initial missteps in handling of the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, the pressure it exerted on WHO and its aggressive mask diplomacy and wolf warrior diplomacy have generated a backlash in Europe, with the exception of some countries.
- China responded quickly by distributing masks, PPE kits and medical equipment, and sending its medical personnel to hard-hit areas across Europe, but weaponization of the scarcity of crucial medical supplies did not go down well with many EU member-states. That the Chinese government did not engage with national governments

alone but also with political administrations at local and city levels to further its interests also came into focus during the pandemic.

- The pandemic has triggered an important realization within the European business community, including in Germany's Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie (BDI) (Federation of German Industries), about the systemic nature of the challenge that the EU faces from China. If Europe cannot mobilize an alternative infrastructure and development finance effectively, take on Chinese subsidies in third country markets or bind China in the EU's model of trade, data and standards, then the balance of power is going to shift in an adverse direction.

## Key Takeaways

- Apart from differences between Europe and China, the Covid crisis has also intensified the differences within the EU member-states. The divisions that have plagued the EU became more evident during the pandemic.
- Following the 2008 Sovereign Debt Crisis, one of the biggest challenges in the EU has been the North-South divide and China has capitalized on this situation to a considerable extent. If the EU's recovery plan can address this challenge, it can alter the internal dynamics amongst its member-states.
- The recent statements released by the European Commission show that the EU-China relations are going in the direction of more questioning and less politeness.
- The EU believes that China can be an important economic and strategic partner if it follows its rules and regulations. However, lately, it has observed that China is trying to change the rules and bend the regulations to fulfill its own interests and agenda. This realization calls for a change in the way the EU conducts its business with China.
- Although China will remain a leading market to the EU, the growing authoritarianism of Xi Jinping and the subordination of economy to national, ideological and security objectives is pushing the EU towards a fundamental rebalancing of how it responds to China

internally as a union, bilaterally as well as globally. While dealing with China, Europe cannot ignore that it is dealing with an authoritarian government with a different outlook on the future of the world order.

- An important question for the EU is not only whether it can frame a suitable China policy but whether it can use the power of its markets and economic resources at its disposal to respond to the strategic challenge that China represents.
- Despite hardships and failures in the recent past, there have been some positive shifts in the EU, in terms of developing defensive instruments in the areas of investment screenings, trade enforcements, procurements and 5G.
- A lot of effort has been made towards self-strengthening the EU in the last few months. Since fair competition is a cornerstone of the EU, the European Commission has come up with a strong competition policy agenda in the recent past.
- In the future, a major dimension of competition is going to be regulatory powers in economy and technology. Europe needs to mobilize new instruments and resources to advance its interests vis-à-vis China.

## Key Takeaways

- Indian perceptions about the EU-China relations are conditioned by official EU statements and briefs on China. These documents do not necessarily paint an accurate picture of EU's evolving perceptions on China as they do not take stock of developments taking place in other policy areas in the EU. Currently, the EU is making some important changes in its policies related to trade, technology, and subsidies. Though these are internal policy changes and are not directly related to China, but they will have a huge impact on China as well as every other trade partner of the EU.
- A year ago, China could be described as more assertive, but today it is more aggressive. Therefore, it is essential for the EU to broaden the field of its prospective partners.
- Both India and the EU believe in the values of democracy, rule of law and a multilateral world order. These shared values and

common strategic and economic interests provide a compelling logic for closer EU-India and Germany-India ties.

## Opening Remarks



**Amb. Ashok K. Kantha** extended a warm welcome to everyone and introduced the distinguished participants: Prof. Frank. N. Pieke; Dr. Andrew Small; Dr. Marieke Ohlberg and Dr. Garima Mohan.

In his opening remarks Amb. Kantha noted that concerns in Europe about China were already on the rise prior to the outbreak of the novel



coronavirus and that the ICS-KAS conversation would explore the changing European perceptions about China in the wake of the Coronavirus outbreak. He emphasised that the conversation would examine if the pandemic has been a watershed moment in the EU-China relations. During his opening remarks, he conveyed that the conversation would attempt to understand the elements of cooperation and competition in the future of the EU-China relations and the EU's response to the escalating US-China strategic rivalry. He further stated that at one hand, the EU's outlook on China has hardened in the recent past, but on the other hand, EU member states continue to seek closer ties with China avoiding policies of confrontation and containment.

Amb. Kantha also raised questions on the EU's plan to cope with the troubling aspects of the rise of China and its growing aggressive behavior. Lastly, he questioned the panel if dialogues in Europe about China were different than dialogues in the Indo-Pacific.

After raising pertinent questions on the issue, Amb. Kantha set the ball rolling and hoped to have a fruitful and a compelling exchange of dialogues.

## Special Remarks



**Mr. Peter Rimmele** remarked on China's image in the current global situation. He began by stating that China's initial missteps in handling the

outbreak of the novel coronavirus, the pressure it exerted on WHO and its wolf warrior diplomacy have generated a considerable backlash in many of the EU member-states. He pointed out that the divisions that had plagued the EU for some time has become more apparent during the pandemic. In this regard, he drew attention to a statement made by the leading Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, who proclaimed that European solidarity seemed to be dwindling as China provided extensive help to many in Europe. Mr. Rimmele also commented on China's mask diplomacy noting that China was quick to distribute masks, PPE kits, medical equipment, and to send its medical personnel to hard-hit areas across Europe but this was not necessarily viewed in a positive light by many Europeans.

Speaking on behalf of KAS, Mr. Rimmele affirmed that the primary mission of KAS around the globe is the promotion of values of democracy, free press, social market economy, a fair social order and development of society. He explained how these values are contingent on a balanced international order where all actors adhere to international rules and fair play. He stated that KAS believes in cooperation and progress through mutual understanding and as long as China is willing to follow the same global rules, it can be an important partner.

Mr. Rimmele reflected on how international borders can no longer be drawn with a quill on a map, international trade cannot be used as a political bargaining chip and that the days of gunpowder diplomacy are behind us. He emphasized that with regards to China, the EU is facing a systemic challenge which calls for a united, robust and holistic approach. A year ago, China could be described as more assertive, but today it is more aggressive. Therefore, it is essential for the EU to broaden the field of prospective partners. In this context, he mentioned how the EU and India could increase their cooperation in Afghanistan and provide a new impetus to fight terrorism which threatens the current global order. He ended his remarks with positive sentiments on the future of India-EU relations.

## Special Remarks

He stated that both India and the EU believe in the values of democracy, rule of law and a multilateral world order. These shared values and common strategic and economic interests provide a compelling logic for closer EU-India and Germany-India ties.

# Moderator



**Dr. Garima Mohan** led off the discussion by outlining the topic for the panel and reiterated that the primary aim of the ICS-KAS Conversation was to analyse whether the coronavirus pandemic represents an inflection point in the EU-China relations. She noted that the coronavirus pandemic has led to an interesting debate in Europe about the role of China. She stated that in addition to the various issues that already exists - the pandemic has added a new irritant to the EU-China ties in the form of disinformation campaigns. There is an increasing awareness in Europe about disinformation whether it is about the origin of the virus or the European response to the virus. She asserted that Chinese responses during the pandemic have raised a few eyebrows especially in Brussels. She mentioned that the EU's chief diplomat, Josep Borrell has started arguing in favour of reconsidering the EU's China strategy based on his belief that the EU is being naïve in its understanding of China. She also drew attention to the fact that a lot of the debates in Europe were about China and Russia together in the context of disseminating disinformation.

Dr. Mohan posed three very interesting questions to the members of the panel. Her first question was if the pandemic represented a watershed point in the EU-China relations or if normalcy in relations would prevail once the pandemic is controlled. Her second question was on Europe's changing perceptions on Beijing and the issues that were in focus in Europe with regards to China. Her third question revolved around perceptions in Europe on China's aggressive stand on various territorial disputes that China has been involved in the recent past.

## Panelists



**Prof. Frank N. Pieke** pointed out that the outbreak of the pandemic may be considered a watershed moment in the EU-China relations to a considerable extent as the crisis situation has helped crystallize the European outlook towards China. He also made an interesting remark about the change in China's nature which is progressing in the direction of a genuine superpower behavior. He explained that earlier China was viewed in Europe as an actor with many problems as well as opportunities. He argued that these perceptions have hardened significantly during the course of the pandemic. He mentioned how the current President of the European Commission (EC), Ursula von der Leyen gave strong statements during the the 22<sup>nd</sup> EU-China bilateral summit (2020) that took place on 22 June via video conference. The recent statements released by the European Commission show that the EU-China relations are going in the direction of more questioning and less politeness.

In the context of changing perceptions, Prof. Pieke noted how a country such as Netherlands which used to be pro-internationalism and pro-globalization has started discussing the likely end of globalization .He also mentioned that another popular sentiment which is growing in Europe is that of confrontation. There is a rising awareness in many of the EU member states that the EU-China relations can no longer be dependent on the expectation of goodwill. Prof. Pieke also discussed in details about how the pandemic has not only sharpened the difference between the EU and China but also among the members of the EU. He noted that the member states of the EU swiftly closed their borders on one another, eroding belief in the EU as an institution. He stressed that there is an air of distress and despair in Europe about European unity. Towards the end of his speech, he talked about partners that the EU could depend on. In this context, he remarked that the transatlantic partnership during the reign of the current US president is not strong enough for the EU to fall back upon.

## Panelists



**Dr. Andrew Small** began his discussion on a positive note stating that the EU has come a long way in its perception of China, particularly in the last 18 months. He pointed out that though this change was accelerated by China's recent actions, in general, the perceptions had been shifting prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus. He noted that one of the most important shifts in perceptions has been in the European business community. The pandemic has triggered an important realization within the European business community, including in Germany's Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie (BDI) (Federation of German Industries), about the systemic nature of challenge that the EU faces from China. He argued that although China will remain a leading market to the EU, the growing authoritarianism under Xi Jinping and the subordination of the economy to national, ideological and security objectives is pushing the EU towards a fundamental rebalancing of how it responds to China internally, bilaterally and globally.

Dr. Small noted that regulatory powers in economy and technology will be a major dimension of competition between the EU and China in the future therefore Europe needs to mobilize new instruments and resources to advance its interests vis-à-vis China. He also mentioned that despite hardships and failures in the recent past, there have been positive shifts in the EU in terms of developing defensive instruments in the areas of investment screenings, trade enforcements, procurements and 5G. He remarked that following the 2008 sovereign debt crisis, one of the biggest challenges in the EU has been the North-South divide and China has capitalized on this situation to a considerable extent. If the EU's recovery plan can address this challenge, it can alter the internal dynamics amongst its member-states. Dr. Small argued that the primary question for the EU is not only whether it can frame a suitable China policy but whether it can use the power of its markets and economic resources at its disposal to respond to the strategic challenge that China represents. He explained that a lot of effort has been made towards self-strengthening in the EU in the last few months. Since fair competition is a cornerstone of the EU, the EC has come up with a strong competition policy agenda in the recent past.

Dr. Small pointed that Indian perceptions about the EU-China relations are conditioned by official EU statements and briefs on China. These documents do not necessarily paint an accurate picture of the EU's evolving perceptions on China as they do not take stock of developments taking place in other policy areas in the EU. Currently, the EU is making some important changes in its policies related to trade, technology, and subsidies. Though these are internal policy changes and are not directly related to China, they will have a huge impact on China as well as every other trade partner of the EU.



**Dr. Marieke Ohlberg** noted that unlike some of the Asian countries, Europe does not face security threats from China in the form of border disputes but security concerns in Europe from China are mostly in the form of hybrid threats, disinformation, and interference. Economic competition and systemic rivalry are also becoming sharper. She noted that China's initial missteps in handling of the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, and its aggressive mask diplomacy and wolf warrior diplomacy have generated a backlash in Europe, with the exception of some countries. She drew attention to the fact that during the pandemic, it became known that the Chinese government did not engage with national governments alone but also with political administrations at local and city levels to further its interests. She pointed out that during the pandemic a couple of reasonably overt threats were issued to some of the governments that did not comply with Beijing's requests. She emphasized that Europe had noticed disinformation being disseminated from China on many occasions prior to the outbreak of the pandemic but it had been hesitant to name and shame. However, during the course of the pandemic, the frequency and gravity of disinformation increased at a pace that was difficult for the EU to ignore and hence, the EU decided to called out China on disinformation.

Dr. Ohlberg ended her discussion with an interesting take on the obstacles to a tougher China policy in the EU. She opined that generally the Southern and Eastern European countries are seen as those opposing a tougher China policy but in actuality, major European economies, particularly Germany, present these obstacles. She further explained that the economies of bigger European states are more invested and dependent on Chinese markets and though Germany portrays itself as a driver of a tough China policy, more often than not it usually stands in the way of a tougher China policy.



# Interventions

**Q. If the German economy or the EU economy depends on Chinese markets to a considerable extent, how will the German government or the EU react to a likely distancing between itself and China, especially if relations are tempered?**

**Dr. Marieke Ohlberg:** Focusing on Germany, attempts have been made to amend relations with China. For instance, on the Hong Kong issues, Chancellor Angela Merkel publicly stated that Germany has an interest in preserving good relations with China. At a time when even Chinese nationals around the world do not have the opportunity to fly back to China, a number of high-profile German companies have negotiated a deal with the Chinese government for their managers to fly back to China. Concrete efforts are made to make sure that not everything breaks off. Both Germany and China are interested in such measures. Regarding the dependence of German economy on Chinese markets, the actual dependence is lower but the complication lies in the fact that some specific sectors such as automotive are highly dependent on China and perhaps, these industries have larger political influence than the small and medium-sized German businesses.

**Dr. Andrew Small:** The role played by industries in some of the shifts in European perception on China is an interesting dynamic. German industry, in particular, played an intellectual leadership role. The term ‘systemic rivalry’ that the EU has been using came from the term ‘systemic competition’ that the BDI initially laid out. The most interesting part of the BDI pressures was that some of the firms that had the closest economic ties with China were the ones on the forefront exerting pressure for a tougher China policy. These firms would not discontinue pursuing market opportunities in China but it showed that they were well aware of the precise long-term risks of doing business with China.

**Q. Will EU’s Asia policy expand beyond China?**

**Dr. Andrew Small:** There is no doubt that the EU policy in Asia is China-centric. However, a need for a shift had been felt to go beyond China at political, economic and strategic levels and there was already a move in this direction some time back. If one traces the visits of European Prime Ministers, Presidents and diplomats to Asia over a fifteen-year period, maximum number of these visits were to China. However, there has been

a shift in political engagements. In fact, it is for practical reasons that the European trade agenda in Asia has been described as 'Asia-minus-one'. For instance, the EU will never pursue a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China but it wants to pursue FTA with all the other countries in the region.

## Interventions

The EU has been in negotiations or has concluded deals with almost every country in the region. China is still at the center of EU's Asia policy but there has been significant rebalancing and shifts in the recent past. There have been advances in particular sectors such as defense cooperation and defense technology cooperation. The other important area for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is the connectivity finance question. If Indo-Pacific is understood as part of the agenda to compete with BRI, then there has been an impetus, particularly in the Europe-Asia connectivity strategy. In principle, the EU has the highest ability to finance the connectivity strategy. Therefore, this could be a very important element to help develop closer Europe-Asia ties. It is not necessarily just about democratic Asia, because Vietnam plays an important role in EU's Asia strategy. A closer relationship with Asia is important for the EU not only for China-related reasons but also for intrinsic reasons.

**Q. Is there a common realisation in Europe that China has used all means possible to access hi-tech from Europe and is aiming to dominate, patent and sell back technology to Europe and the rest of the world? Is Europe united on this front or will China be able to continue to divide Europe through the 17+1 mechanism by offering to fund infrastructure projects in select countries in Europe and using them to its advantage?**

**Prof. Frank N. Pieke:** Technology is one area where the EU policy is potentially the most promising. There has been an increasing awareness in Europe that China has been buying hi-tech companies and businesses that control and develop hi-tech. It has also dawned upon many European countries that Research and Development (R&D) exchanges between universities have not necessarily been innocent and they do sometimes serve strategic agenda. These realisations have led to a push for better screening mechanisms for R&D projects at the EU level.

**Dr. Andrew Small:** The 5G question has been a wake-up call in many respects. The telecom industry is one area where Europe actually has champions. However, Europe's economy is likely to be in serious threat if the EU does not take competition from Chinese firms seriously. The critical 5G decision is yet to be taken but the debate has shifted drastically. The US is offering finance to telecom companies such as Ericsson and Nokia in third markets countries in order to ensure that western/ non-Chinese firms are able to compete. The 5G question has been helpful in catalysing the realisation that a joint effort is needed.

## Interventions

**Q. Will the EU be able to evolve a comprehensive policy towards China which sees China as a strategic adversary?**

**Dr. Marieke Ohlberg:** Tremendous progress in this regard has been seen over the past period. Europe calling China a strategic rival is unprecedented. There is a shared sentiment in Europe that they can somehow get some fundamental concessions out of China post-Covid. One of the biggest problems, so far, is the lack of siloing. EU, at the same time, is also aware that if it criticises China very strongly, Beijing may refuse to cooperate on other important areas such as health and climate.

**Q. The EU has internal strains amongst the member states, it has problems with the US, Russia and now China. Given this context, what are the broad policy options for the EU?**

**Prof. Frank N. Pieke:** The fundamental way out for the EU is to be more autonomous and to take decisions based on its interest rather than on the basis of perceived loyalties or perceived systemic similarities, shared ideologies or ideals. In other words, realpolitik could be one way for the EU. It should not be hesitant to work with Russia, China or India if doing so serves its interest.

## Speaker Profiles



**Prof. Frank N. Pieke** is a Professor of Modern China Studies at Leiden University, and has served as Director and CEO of the Mercator Institute for China Studies. He studied Cultural Anthropology and Chinese Studies at the University of Amsterdam and the University of California, Berkeley, where he received his Ph.D. in 1992. His current research revolves around the impact of China on the Netherlands and the EU, foreign immigrant groups in China and the transformation of Chinese Communist Party. His most recent books are *The Good Communist* (2009) and *Knowing China* (2016), both published by Cambridge University Press. Recently, Prof. Pieke contributed an ICS occasional paper entitled “China Through European Eyes”.



**Dr. Andrew Small** is Senior Transatlantic Fellow with German Marshall Fund's Asia Program, which he established in 2006. His research focuses on U.S.-China relations, Europe-China relations, Chinese policy in South Asia, and broader developments in China's foreign and economic policy. His articles and papers have been published in *The New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The Washington Quarterly*, among others. He is the author of the book *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* published with Hurst / Oxford University Press in 2015. Dr. Small was educated at Balliol College, University of Oxford.

## Speaker Profiles



**Dr. Mareike Ohlberg** is a Senior Fellow in the German Marshall Fund's Asia Program and co-leads the Stockholm China Forum. She has been the An Wang postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University's Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies and a postdoctoral fellow at Shih-Hsin University in Taipei. She is a co-author of the book *Hidden Hand: How the Communist Party of China is Reshaping the World* (2020). Dr. Ohlberg has a doctoral degree in Chinese studies from the University of Heidelberg and a master's degree in East Asian regional studies from Columbia University.



**Dr. Garima Mohan** is a Fellow with the German Marshall Fund's Asia Program. Based in GMF's Berlin office, she focuses on European policy in Asia, Indian foreign and security policy, and maritime security in the Indo-Pacific. Dr. Mohan holds a PhD from the Freie Universität Berlin and received her master's degree from the London School of Economics. She is also a non-resident fellow at Carnegie India, an Asian Forum for Global Governance Fellow, and a 2017 Raisina Young Fellow. She has previously worked with the Global Public Policy Institute and EU's Asia-Pacific Research and Advice Network.

## Institution Profiles



**The Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi (ICS)** is one of the oldest research institutions on China and East Asia in India. With support from the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, it is the mandate of the ICS to develop a strategic vision for India's dealings with China and to help adapt India's priorities quickly and appropriately to address the research and educational demands arising from China's emergence. The ICS seeks to promote interdisciplinary study and research on China and the rest of the South-East Asia with a focus on expertise in China's

domestic politics, international relations, economy, history, health, education, border studies, language and culture, and on India-China comparative studies. It also looks to foster active links with business, media, government and non-governmental organizations in India through applied research, executive training programmes, and seminars and conferences, and to serve as a repository of knowledge and data grounded in first-hand research on Chinese politics, economy, international relations, society and culture.

Its supporters include Tata Trusts, Indian Council of Social Science Research GargiVidya Prakash Dutt Memorial, Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation and Pirojsha Godrej Foundation. It also boasts of various universities worldwide as academic partners. The mandate of the ICS is to develop a strategic vision for India's dealings with China and to help adapt India's priorities quickly and appropriately to address the research and educational demands arising from China's emergence.

The Institute has played a notable role in shaping the public opinion on China through a variety of outlets such as its regular publications like China Report, ICS Analysis, ICS Occasional Papers and Working Papers, and Monographs, which marks its activity on the academic forefront. It also has a robust social media presence as it is very active on Twitter and Instagram, uploads regularly on Soundcloud, videos on YouTube and publishes regular blog pieces on its website. It also hosts weekly lectures, seminars, and conferences inviting scholars from prestigious institutions around the world.

## Institution Profiles



**The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung** (KAS) is a German political foundation with a Christian-Democratic profile. Through political education and counselling, the foundation campaigns worldwide for peace, freedom and justice. Their principal aim is to preserve and promote liberal democracy

and strengthen international dialogue. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is a partner of the European Union to strengthen democracy, promote party cooperation and non-state actors (civil society, media, etc.), carry out political education and support good governance and decentralization. In cooperation with European and international partners, KAS also applies for EU service projects and benefits strongly from the worldwide institutional presence through its foreign offices as well as the broad network of local partners and experts on project-relevant topics.

Established in 1955 as “Society for Christian-Democratic Civic Education”, the Foundation took on the name of the first Federal Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer in 1964. In Germany, 16 regional offices offer a wide variety of civic education conferences and events. Their offices abroad are in charge of over 200 projects in more than 120 countries. The foundation's headquarters are situated in Sankt Augustin near Bonn, and also in Berlin. There, an additional conference centre, named “The Academy”, was opened in 1998.

As a think-tank and consulting agency, their soundly researched scientific fundamental concepts and current analyses are meant to offer a basis for possible political action. The Berlin Academy is the national forum of dialogue between the spheres of politics, economy, science, and society. In Germany, they organise conferences and events to foster public debate and participation with more than 2,500 events per year which attract 145,000 participants. They provide moral and material support to intellectually gifted young people, not only from Germany, but also from Central and Eastern Europe and developing countries. They support young artists and award the renowned KAS Literature Prize every year. They also have been awarding their own local journalist prize since 1980. The “Social Market Economy Award of the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation” has honoured personalities since 2002 who have made an outstanding contribution to maintaining and developing the social market economy.